WAKING THE WARRIORS

ALSO BY BEN OKRI

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A Fire in My Head

Plays

The Outsider
Changing Destiny

WAKING THE WARRIORS

BEN OKRI



An Apollo Book

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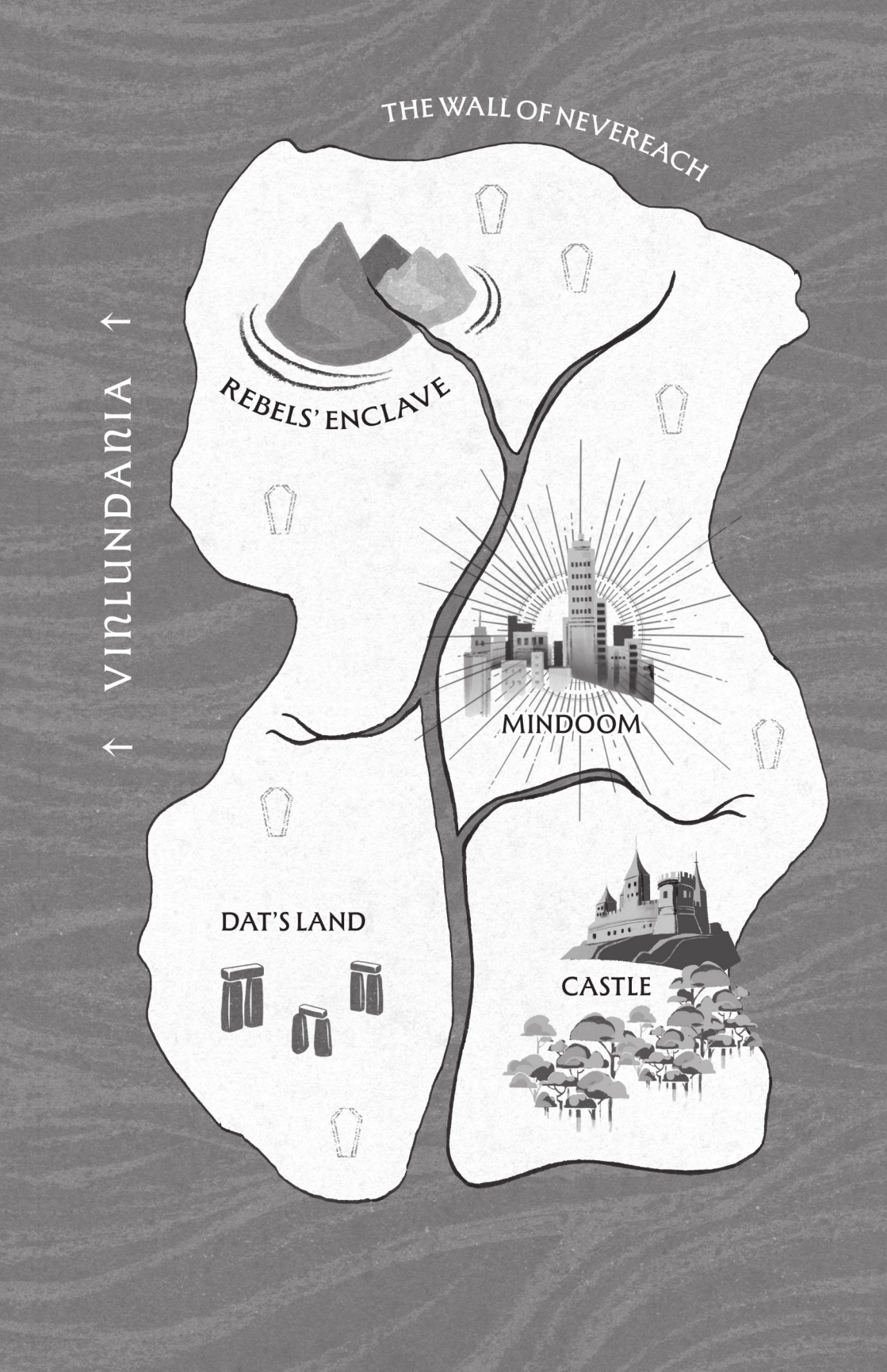
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For Charlotte Jarvis

‘The weakest thing in the world can overcome
the strongest thing in the world.’

Lao Tzu


THE
LAND OF
NEVEREACH


THE WALL OF NEVEREACH
↑ VINLUNDANIA ↑
REBELS' ENCLAVE
MINDOOM
DAT'S LAND
CASTLE


THE
WAKERS

There is a saying that the real warriors who will save the land will awaken on its last days. No one knows how old this saying is.



Two men had been walking for days in the dryness of the countryside. Five mornings before, the older man had woken the younger at dawn, telling him that they had to leave their home immediately. Without any questions, the young man had gathered what they needed and they had fled. They had passed through many villages and now were skirting the edge of a field, the old man stopping every other minute and bending over in pain.

'Apibus, I can't go on,' he said.

'You must, Grandad. You said we're close.'

'We've been close for the last day. I'm finished. I can't go on.'

'That's what you said yesterday. Yet look how far we've come. Maybe we should rest and begin again in the morning.'

'If I rest, I won't get up again. This is the end for me. From here on, it's your journey. Only remember why we've come.'

'Why've we come? You've never told me. You just woke me up and said: "We have to go now, or we won't see tomorrow." And that was it. I obeyed you faithfully.'

'That you did,' said his grandfather laboriously, leaning on his staff, breathing heavily. 'And it reflects very well on how you were raised. Your father is doing important work for the underground, travelling round the country, warning people of what's coming. Trying to wake up the fight in them. It doesn't matter now what happens to me. But you, Api, you must survive. You have a special destiny.'

'So you keep saying.'

'Do I?'

'Yes, that and the business with the star.'

'The star?'

'Every night since our escape you've pointed at a certain star – one that seems to have an arc of milk coming out of it—'

'That's why it's called the Milky Way.'

'"There's our direction!" you say. "Aim for that star." Every night we've aimed for it and you've never told me why. And now you say you can't carry on.'

The grandfather studied Apibus for a moment, then he said with a stoic sigh:

'Do you know what happened in our village after we fled? Soldiers burned the houses and killed all the men and took away the women.'

'I don't believe it. How do you know all that?'

'Knowing things is the business of my life.'

'They killed all the men? I can't believe it,' cried the young man.

'Not even if I tell you it's true?'

'You weren't there.'

'I was.'

'But you've been with me the whole time.'

'I was there as well.'

The old man sighed again. Then he went close to his grandson and looked into his eyes and muttered incomprehensible syllables. Apibus saw a kite wheeling above him in the air. His grandfather paused, raised his hand slowly, then stuck a forefinger into the middle of the young man's forehead.

Immediately, as if he were there, Apibus saw scenes of carnage. He saw men with jackal-faces descending on their village, slashing and stabbing whatever stood in their way. They cut the throats of the men, slaughtering them as they ran or fought or slept in their beds. They butchered the boys and set fire to the houses. They seized the women and carried them off. Many of the women were thrown into cages that were slung over the horses ridden away by faceless men. A woman stabbed herself in the heart rather than be taken.

Houses were razed and the whole village burned. He saw it in a flash, as in a dream. Then with a sharp noise in his head, it all ended. The old man pulled his forefinger from Apibus's forehead, making him reel back and collapse on the path.

The old man sat next to the young one and waited

for him to recover. A black hawk, spiralling in the air, swooped down low and studied them. Then it shot back up into the effulgent sky.

That evening, waking suddenly from a long sleep, Apibus sat up and found that his grandfather was gone. He searched for him all day and then went on alone into the desolate land.




BOOK
ONE





1

The walls of Nevereach were ghostly in the night. From time to time they cried out as if alive. When the cries sounded, the men guarding the walls tightened their hoods, their eyes shining in the dark.

On one such night a team of horses, making the earth howl beneath them, thundered towards the walls on the northern borders of the island. Seven horsemen reared up, startling the guards.

'All well?' asked the head horseman.

'All well,' replied one of the guards.

'The wall?'

'Secure.'

'There's talk of a breach.'

'Impossible, sir.'

'You've been asleep on your watch.'

Three of the horsemen circled the guard.

'I promise you, sir—'

'Too late for promises.'

A moment later, the guard was hanging from a beam with a rope round his neck, at the commander's signal. His feet dangled and kicked for a long minute and then were still.

The other guards looked on in horror.

'Do your jobs!' the commander snarled.

He pointed at a bald-headed man among them.

'You know what to do?'

The guard thumped his chest.

'Serve our leader and defend the wall with our lives.'

'Good. You'll do. You're in charge here now.'

With that the commander and his entourage turned and rode away, raising red dust into the night air. The earth shook with the thunder of their hooves.

'Okay!' shouted the new chief guard. 'Get back to work, you scum. Or I'll have your heads off before breakfast!'



2

A gigantic wall rose like an apparition around the city of Mindoom. The wall blocked out sections of the sky and sent streaks of lightning towards the clouds. Howls rent the air as though hell were nearby.

The city quivered with high towers, shining skyscrapers and bright lights. Hundreds of screens flickered with images of people living glamorous lives in the place of unimaginable luxury that was Mindoom. But the howls gave the city a sinister aspect, a mood of desolation.

Dark figures on horseback patrolled the walls and the streets of Mindoom. These were the guardians of the realm, the soldiers of the dark powers that now ruled the land.



3

A woman with a child in her arms stood in the middle of a field of rye.

The field was golden and the wind made dark patterns among the stalks. Beyond the field were the oaks, and beyond the oaks the sky bore the mood of the sea.

The woman cradled the baby all day, while clouds scudded above the earth. In the evening, the lights changed rapidly. Then it was night and stars spilled into the immensity of the sky. The woman stood unmoving in the middle of the field, with the baby in her arms.

In the dead of night the woman lifted the baby up to the heavens. And from the sky, from a chain of stars, a parabola of a white line poured into the mouth of the child.

The mother fed her baby the milk of the stars. The baby drank for a long time and when it stopped the white line vanished into the heavens. The mother rocked the child till it fell asleep.